# Commander's Intent

## Providing the Focus for Operations

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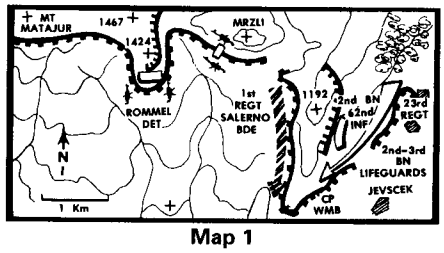
A great deal of attention has been devoted in recent years to the importance of a clear commander's intent statement. The U.S. Army Command and General Staff College teaches a format approach to the intent: essentially, purpose, method, and end state.

In the five-paragraph field order, the intent follows immediately after the Concept of the Operation, and the recommended length of an intent is three to five sentences. But I have seen intent statements ranging from one or two sentences—scribbled on the matrix format task force operations order (found in Field Manual 71-2, *The Tank and Mechanized Infantry Task Force*)—to the multi-paragraph intents found in general defense plans and formal, deliberate plans at corps level and higher. Ultimately, however, the intent should express the purpose of the operation and the desired end state. Intent and mission are linked by the purpose of the operation.

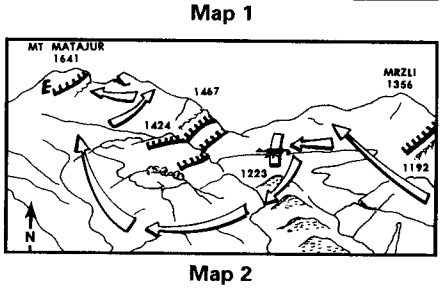
During an informal discussion at Fort Leavenworth in 1991, Brigadier General Huba Wass de Czege cited an incident from German General Erwin Rommel's classic book *Attacks* as the best result of a clear commander's intent:

In October 1917 Rommel was a lieutenant serving with the Wuerttemberg Mountain Battalion in the Italian Alps. The fortifications around Mount Matajur, the highest point in the region, were key to the Italian defenses (Map 1). Over a period of days, Rommel led attacks that reached the mountain's slopes. These attacks were so successful that he was on the verge of breaking through the defenses and unhinging the entire front. Flushed with success, he was preparing to continue the attack when an order from his battalion commander reached him: "The Wuerttemberg Mountain Battalion withdraws." The battalion commander, on a mountain peak behind Rommel, formed the impression that Mount Matajur had been taken and was ordering a reorganization of the battalion for the defense. Rommel was faced with a dilemma—continue the attack or comply with orders.

***[Rommel] asked himself, "Should I break off the engagement and return to Mount Cragonza?... No!" He reasoned that the order to do so was based on incorrect knowledge of the situation and the existing opportunity.***




Map 1




Map 2

The situation was unfolding. Most of the battalion began to withdraw, except for the forces with Rommel. He asked himself, "Should I break off the engagment and return to Mount Cragonza [the site of the battalion commander]...No!" He reasoned that the order was based on incorrect knowledge of the situation and the existing opportunity. He wrote later in *Attacks*, "Unfinished business remained...and the terrain favored the plan of attack" (Map 2). Rommel successfully broke through the Italian defense and seized Mount Matajur.

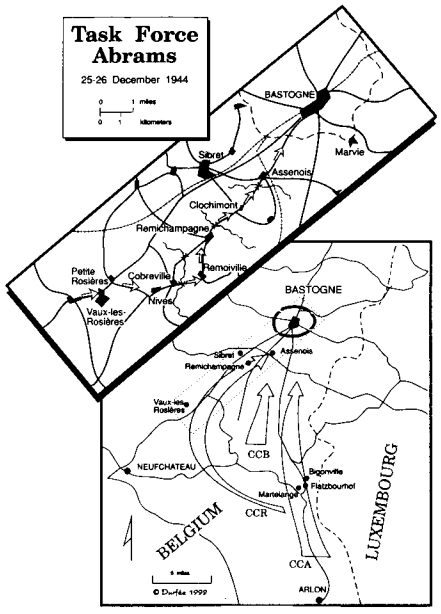
General Wass de Czege asked the rhetorical question, "How did Lieutenant Rommel know that taking Mount Matajur would break the Italian defense in the Alps?" His answer to this question was that the corps commander had clearly spelled out the reason for his intent. And one small-unit leader, who had a clear understanding of the higher commander's intent, acted in accordance with that intent instead of following orders.

A similar incident occurred during the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944 when Lieutenant Colonel Creighton W. Abrams understood the intent of the army commander: "Relieve Bastogne."

Bastogne was encircled, and the U.S. 4th Armored Division was ordered to relieve it. Abrams, commanding the 37th Tank Battalion, led the vanguard of the Combat Command Reserve (CCR). The plan was to attack through the town of Remichampagne, to Clochimont, then to Sibret, and finally into Bastogne. Abrams led from the front in his own tank, Thunderbolt.

The battle for Remichampagne went well, assisted by a flight of Air Force P-47s that arrived unexpectedly to bomb and strafe the German defenses. By mid-afternoon, Abrams' battalion was down to 20 tanks, and the infantry battalion of the CCR (a French battalion) was understrength by 200 men. Darkness was falling fast. The orders were to continue to Sibret. Abrams sensed that the enemy was in strength there but that he could break through to Bastogne and begin the relief if he went through the town of Assenois. Lewis Sorley, in his biography of Abrams, says that Abrams said to Lieutenant Colonel George Jaques (the infantry battalion commander), "Let's try a dash through Assenois straight into Bastogne," and "[They] didn't check with anyone about this switch in plans. The CCR commander was weak...and if Abrams had called and asked for the change in mission, he probably would have been denied." (*Thunderbolt From the Battle of the Bulge to Vietnam and Beyond: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Times*, Simon & Schuster, 1992, page 76.)

Abrams and the 37th Tank Battalion made the dash and linked up with the 101st Airborne Division soldiers holding Bastogne. Still later in the battle, the CCR commander ordered his forces to move into the lines of Bastogne. According to Sorley, Abrams thought this was "a bad idea, that the line from Remoiville to Remichampagne to Clochimont to Assenois ought to be manned to secure the corridor leading into Bastogne." Abrams, the commander on the spot, knew that the most important mission—relieving Bastogne—took precedence over an order issued without current knowledge of the situation.




**Map 3**

The intent in each of these instances clearly conveyed the guiding purpose of the operation. It served as it was intended, providing guidance in the absence of other orders or even conflicting orders. In both of these situations, the commander on the scene understood the intent of the operation and knew that accomplishing that intent and the original mission was more important than following orders to execute a new mission.

***Abrams [whose orders were to continue to Sibret] said, "Let's try a dash through Assenois straight into Bastogne," and...didn't check with anyone about the switch in plans.***

These historical examples highlight the need to make the intent statement very clear. Since operations do not unfold as expected once contact is made, the statement must provide focus for commanders at least two levels down. During an operation, decisions must often be made at once, with little or no time for contemplation. Prussian General Karl von Clausewitz tells us that war is the realm of uncertainty and chance. Information and assumptions made during the planning process are open to doubt after contact. In this fog of war, the guiding light must be the commander's intent.

The intent is a key part of the operation plan, and, as these examples show, there are times when accomplishing the *intent* far outweighs accomplishing the *mission*.

The intent as we now write it is part of the Execution paragraph of the field order, immediately after Concept of the Operation. This placement implies a tie to the concept; indeed, since the recommended format includes Method as a part of the intent, this may be the correct place for it. But the true tie, as the examples show, is not to the concept or the method of employment of forces but to the mission.

The commander's intent is not a restatement of the concept; it is tied to the mission as a description of the operation's guiding purpose. The method unique to the fighting style of a commander must be transmitted face to face, commander to commander. Once the battle is joined, subordinate commanders must be guided by the purpose of the operation and the desired end state of our forces relative to those of the enemy. A platoon leader engulfed in smoke near Old Baldy at the Combat Maneuver Training Center in Germany, when he sees the grill doors of the opposing force's vehicles, must know in his heart that attacking the regiment fulfills the commander's intent.

Returning to the tie between mission and commander's intent and where to put the intent in the field order, I believe it should be paragraph 2.b. of the order:

1. SITUATION.
2. a. MISSION.
   b. COMMANDER'S INTENT.
3. EXECUTION.

The commander's intent should express, as a minimum, the purpose of the operation and the desired end state. Placing the intent with the mission will not inhibit any commander from stating what he wants in the intent sub-paragraph. And this placement of the intent will more clearly demonstrate the natural tie between the two. The method of employment properly belongs in the

concept of the operation. The intent is not a restatement of the concept. Its purpose is to guide the action of subordinate units and leaders when events become wrapped in the confusion of battle.

Clausewitz wrote more than 100 years ago that, "Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult." The soul of the mission order is in the intent—the "simple thing" that must be accomplished and that commanders must therefore keep in mind throughout the operation.

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# To The New XO At Any Level:

## Some Practical, Hard-Learned Advice

**LIEUTENANT COLONEL ROBERT G. BOYKO**

You have been chosen to serve as an executive officer—at company, battalion, or brigade level—the second-in-command of an Army unit, one heartbeat away from the top job. You are probably both excited and apprehensive about this new assignment. Having served as an XO at each of these levels, I would like to give you some practical, hard-learned advice on how to succeed as an XO—at any level.

First of all, let me be brutally frank: If your new title of executive officer conjures up images of you replacing your fallen commander in the heat of battle and leading your troops to victory, you need to think again. There is always that possibility, of course, but it is quite remote. Furthermore, the actual amount of time you will spend leading the unit, even in peacetime, is not likely to be more than five percent. What you should do during the other 95 percent is what this article is all about.

Your marching orders as an XO can best be stated as follows: You are in charge of all the things your boss doesn't want to do or doesn't have time to do. This means that arms rooms, supply rooms, personnel action centers, and motor pools will see more of you than the lead track or the lead platoon during the next conflict or the next combat training center rotation. In short, you are the man behind the scenes who makes things work.

The life of an XO is not glamorous, but it is necessary. In an ideal Army, the commander at every level would be involved in every facet of his unit's existence, but this ideal can never be realized. The commander does not have the time or the energy to be everywhere, and that's why he needs you.

The best of commanders must spend most of his time planning and conducting training and operations. At battalion and brigade levels, he has an energetic and competent operations officer (S-3) to help him. This means that although your tactical ideas may be valued, if you're heavily involved in training and operations as an XO, you're probably being misused.

So what are your duties?

The answer to this question begins to emerge during a face-to-face meeting with the commander, preferably before you take over as XO. He will talk and you will listen. Hopefully, he will give you his vision of where he wants to take the unit. A good commander will also give you his ideas on what you should do and what specific areas he wants you to concentrate on. But he will not define the job for you; you will have to do that for yourself.

The next step after meeting the commander is to formulate your own vision of what you want to accomplish. Take time to define your goals. These goals may include successful deployments to major training events, successful performance at those events, and successful redeployments. They can also focus on definite goals for each functional area. This vision should be the basis of your officer evaluation report support form. The goals provide a road map for your focus as XO. Over time, the people affected most by your goals—the commodity leaders and staff members—should know your specific goals for their respective areas.

Once you are armed with your vision, the next step is to meet your subordinates. Who they are is determined by the level at which you are serving, but at any level they fall into two groups: those who work primarily for you (whom you rate) and those who work for someone else but who support you or are supported by you.

At company level, the people who work for you will be the commodity managers—supply sergeant, armorer, and so on. At battalion and brigade level, they will be the primary and special staffs. The people who work for someone else but who are vital to your success at company level will be the platoon leaders and platoon sergeants.